

This week in history: April 16-22

16 April 2018

25 years ago: FBI raid in Waco, Texas, kills 76

On April 19, 1993, US Attorney General Janet Reno ordered a military-style FBI raid on the compound of a small Christian sect near Waco, Texas, resulting in 76 deaths, including 25 children.

The FBI attack on the Branch Davidian complex, called Mount Carmel, was the outcome of a 51-day siege that began on February 28 when federal authorities attempted to enter the building with a search warrant based on the claim that the sect and its leader, David Koresh, had built up a stockpile of illegal weapons. The initial raid was a fiasco for the ATF. Six of its members were shot dead and another 16 were wounded. Five adult male members of the Branch Davidians were killed.

In the ensuing standoff, the FBI, guided by the Clinton administration, showed little interest in negotiating a peaceful outcome. The FBI first inflamed the situation by falsely claiming that the Branch Davidians were making illegal drugs, and later, as the siege dragged on, that Koresh and other adults were physically abusing children, a claim for which there was also little evidence. The FBI approached the situation as if it were dealing with a hostage crisis, but, whatever the peculiarities of the religious cult, its adult members had joined voluntarily.

The FBI attempted to starve out the Branch Davidians by cutting power to the compound and denying food and water. It equipped its agents with an array of military hardware, including .50 caliber rifles, nine Bradley Fighting Vehicles and five other US Army combat vehicles, which were used to crush the Branch Davidians' cars in the compound parking lot. It blasted piercing sounds—recordings of rabbits screaming as they are slaughtered—at night into the structure to deny sleep to occupants.

On April 19, the FBI attacked the building, first using armored vehicles to punch holes in its walls, through which it then pumped combustible CS tear gas. It then bombarded the building with CS gas grenades. By noon, fires had broken out in the structure, which the FBI claimed were started by the Branch Davidians. Only nine occupants were able to escape the assault alive. The rest were killed by the fire, collapsed walls and ceilings, or gun fire, with evidence suggesting that some, including perhaps Koresh himself,

shot themselves to avoid perishing in the flames.

50 years ago: Leading Tory delivers fascist “Rivers of Blood” speech

On April 20, 1968, a leading Conservative Member of Parliament Enoch Powell (1912-1998) delivered a fascist speech to a major Tory Party gathering, the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Center in Birmingham. The unabashedly racist diatribe, parts of which were televised, condemned non-white immigration and warned that in the United Kingdom eventually “the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.”

Powell, who represented Wolverhampton South West in the House of Commons, framed his argument as if he were speaking on behalf of “ordinary” constituents. This was a lie. Powell was a representative of the ruling class. His real intentions were to incite a right-wing movement and to divide immigrant workers—whose arrival in the UK was an outcome of the long and bloody history of British colonial plunder—from British workers.

Powell sought to blame immigrants for the austerity being imposed on the whole working class. British workers, he said,

found themselves made strangers in their own country. They found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places, their homes and neighbourhoods changed beyond recognition, their plans and prospects for the future defeated; at work they found that employers hesitated to apply to the immigrant worker the standards of discipline and competence required of the native-born worker....

Powell also sought to incite fears that Britain's immigrants could become like what he referred to as “the American Negro:”

That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we

watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect. Indeed, it has all but come. In numerical terms, it will be of American proportions long before the end of the century.

To stop Britain from becoming “a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre”, Powell proposed ridding it of immigrants by “stopping, or virtually stopping, further inflow, and by promoting the maximum outflow.”

75 years ago: Warsaw Ghetto uprising

On April 19, 1943, Jewish inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto, in the capital of German-occupied Poland, launched a heroic rebellion against the genocidal Nazi regime. The uprising inspired workers and young people throughout Europe who were engaged in the resistance to the fascist powers and their crimes.

The Warsaw Ghetto had been established by the Nazis in late 1940. Some 450,000 Jews in the Polish capital were rounded up and forced into what was effectively an open-air prison about 2.5 miles long and one mile wide. By early 1942, an estimated 5,000 people were dying every month of disease and starvation. At the same time, the Nazis began sending tens of thousands from the ghetto to their death in the gas chambers at the Treblinka concentration camp.

In early 1943, just 60,000 Jews remained in the Warsaw Ghetto. In February, senior Nazi minister Heinrich Himmler planned an onslaught against the remaining population. This began on April 19, when 5,000 German troops, predominantly from the notorious SS, entered the ghetto, with the intention of exterminating its residents.

The Jewish population resisted the onslaught. Political organizations in the ghetto, including the left-wing Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa (ZOB), had conducted widespread political agitation, and logistical preparations to oppose the Nazi incursion. They conducted a guerrilla campaign against the fascist troops, using small arms, a handful of rifles and machine guns, and improvised weapons, including hand grenades.

Over the following days, the barbarism of the German troops intensified. They killed women and children, and set much of the ghetto on fire. On May 9, Nazi troops surrounded the secret ZOB headquarters. The fighters inside committed suicide rather than fall into the grip of the fascists.

On May 16, the ghetto was liquidated. Some 20,000 Jewish residents had been killed. Almost all of the rest were transported to Treblinka. The uprising, and the tragic fate of

those who led it, also highlighted the complicity of the Allied powers in the genocide against the Jewish population. All of them, including the Roosevelt administration in the United States, had rejected calls for mass intakes of Jewish refugees and had made no military effort to block the Nazi transfer of Jews to the concentration camps.

100 years ago: Britain extends draft age to 56, includes Ireland

On April 20, 1918, the House of Commons issued a proclamation lifting the draft age of British men up to age 56 years and subjecting, for the first time, the colony of Ireland to the draft.

The law, called British Military Service (2), was proclaimed by the King in council with the title “Withdrawing certain certificates of exemption from military service.”

The first military conscription bill had been imposed by the Military Service Act of January 1916. This had capped the service age at 41 and exempted Ireland so as not to inflame the growing anti-colonial movement there.

The second military conscription bill triggered a wave of protest in Ireland, with Catholic bishops denouncing it and the nationalist Sinn Fein taking the lead in political opposition. Mass protest meetings were held throughout the island. On April 18, a one-day general strike brought all commerce, production, transport—even government offices—to a stop.

Prime Minister Lloyd George had demanded the measure for the obvious reason that the British Army had suffered too many casualties to maintain its positions on the Western Front—some 2.5 million dead, wounded, and missing in all. There were simply not enough young men left from England, Scotland, and Wales. It was necessary find new cannon fodder among middle-aged men and the Irish.

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